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# Examining Preschool and Kindergarten Teachers' Beliefs about Play in Ghana

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# Academic Leadership Journal

## INTRODUCTION

Children all over the world engage in play. However, there are variations in their play activities. Play is present in all cultures (Singer & Singer, 1990), involves a wide array of behaviors from decisive to indecisive, and continues to be a key area of study from diversified viewpoints, ranging from ecological to cognitive (Sutton-Smith, 1993; Wolfberg & Schuler, 1993). Though categorical, criteria, and continuum approaches have assisted in organizing and classifying play activities, no definition or approach has accurately captured the range of behaviors that could be construed as play (Howard, Jenvey & Hill, 2006; Moyles, 2001). Even though play is defined variously by different authors, The United Nations High Commission for Human Rights has recognized it as a fundamental right of every child because it is a natural universal phenomenon that is essential for children's optimal learning and development (Frost & Norquist, 2007; Ginsburg, 2007; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989).

Certainly, play in its diverse forms is an important business for children (Craig & Dunn, 2007) because their healthy development depends on sufficient time and opportunity to play (International Play Association, 2008). Dewey's view on play resonates with this idea; he asserts that for younger children work is undifferentiated from play (Dewey, 1916). Since play contributes to children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development, it is an indispensable aspect of their well-being. Play enables children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and emotional strength (Ashiabi, 2007; Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2005; Ginsburg, 2007). Additionally, play is vital for healthy brain development (Ginsburg; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera & Lamb, 2004). Moreover, play is a simple joy that is treasured mostly during childhood (Ginsburg). Since for most children, happiness is synonymous with play, environments that support children's play ensure their healthy development.

The school setting is one of such environments because play is fundamental to the academic environment. Frost and Norquist (2007) and Ginsburg (2007) have argued that play helps children to adjust to school settings and enhances their learning readiness, behaviors, and problem-solving skills. Even though play is mostly viewed as the cornerstone of early childhood programs, teachers have beliefs about play that often differ from children's beliefs, and school play has different purposes compared with children's play at home (Ceglowski, 1997). It is essential to examine preschool and kindergarten teachers' beliefs and role in making play a developmental and learning experience for young children because teachers' beliefs, practices, and contexts determine the extent to which they utilize play to promote learning and development in their classrooms (Hadley, 2002; McLane, 2003). This study therefore, aims at examining Ghanaian preschool and kindergarten teachers' beliefs regarding children's play.

The extant literature shows that when children are supported in their play, their learning and development are enhanced. There is widespread belief that children in early childhood programs should spend part of their day engaged in play because when they engage in any type of play, they

develop skills and knowledge that contribute to future school success (Ceglowski, 1997; Dodge, 1995; Pickett, 2002). Consistent with this view, play has been found to be the most developmentally appropriate way for children to learn since it facilitates problem-solving, perspective taking, social skills, and development of the mind (Bailey, 2002; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; McArdle, 2001). Nolting and Porretta (1992) contend that to ignore the concept of play in early childhood programs would be to disregard the basic educational needs of children. Similarly, Elkind (1987) notes that it is essential to respect children's play productions as means of protecting, defending, and enhancing their sense of competence. However, increasing expectations for teacher-directed academic instruction has limited the time for play in early childhood classrooms (Ashiabi, 2007; Bergen, 1998; Ginsburg, 2007).

Most scholars in the field of early childhood education advocate for play-based teaching and learning activities that offer multiple ways for children to learn diverse skills and concepts (Fromberg, 2002; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002). Yet, not all teachers hold personal beliefs about teaching and learning that match this point of view (Wilcox-Herzog & Ward, 2004). In their book, *Right from the Start: Teaching children ages three to eight*, Spodek and Saracho (1994) suggest that the difference between educational play and noneducational play is not in the activities children engage in or children's enjoyment, but in the purposes that teachers assign to play. According to Ceglowski (1997), in children's homes, play kitchens could keep children out of trouble. On the other hand, teachers view housekeeping play as developing children's understandings of roles, relationships, and promoting self-esteem (Ceglowski). Consequently, in early childhood programs, teachers can provide children with opportunities that will enhance the educational value of play.

A considerable number of studies that have explored play's developmental potential in the early years of life, relied generally on observations of children at play. However, since other factors may enhance or limit young children's play activities, it is essential to broaden our understanding of how children's play enhances their learning and development via the lenses of preschool and kindergarten teachers. Thus, examining Ghanaian preschool and kindergarten teachers' beliefs about play will add another dimension to this area of research and provide a more thorough understanding of the usefulness of play for children's learning and development across domains in school/educational settings.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The main aim of this study is to examine preschool and kindergarten teachers' beliefs about children's play. Other objectives are to examine how the years of teaching experience and child development course(s) taken influence preschool and kindergarten teachers' beliefs about children's play.

## **Research Hypotheses**

Based on the introduction and literature reviewed, the following hypotheses were tested at 0.05 significance level in order to achieve the objectives of the study:

**Ho<sub>1</sub>:** There is no statistically significant difference in Ghanaian teachers' scores on the Teachers' Play Beliefs Survey (TPBS) when compared by level of teaching.

**Ho<sub>2</sub>:** There is no statistically significant difference in Ghanaian Teachers' scores on the Teachers' Play Beliefs Survey (TPBS) when compared by years of teaching experience.

**H<sub>03</sub>:** There is no statistically significant difference in Ghanaian teachers' scores on the Teachers' Play Beliefs Survey (TPBS) when compared by child development course(s) taken.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study is on Ghanaian preschool and kindergarten teachers' beliefs about children's play. The descriptive survey design was employed to identify the differences between preschool and kindergarten teachers' beliefs about children's play and to examine how the years of teaching experience and child development course(s) taken influences preschool and kindergarten teachers' beliefs about children's play.

### **Participants**

A total of 221 (110 preschool and 111 kindergarten) teachers were recruited through a convenience sampling method. The participants consisted of teachers enrolled in professional development training programs in two locations (Accra and Winneba) in Ghana and teachers in selected early childhood schools in Accra. There are ten regions in Ghana, and Accra is the capital city. Winneba is one of the urban centers in the Central Region of Ghana. At both the preschool and kindergarten levels, majority of the teachers who participated in the study were over 40 years old (31.2% preschool and 29.7% kindergarten). As regards gender, majority of the participants were females (97.3% preschool and 97.3% kindergarten teachers). Also, majority of both preschool and kindergarten teachers reported that they had taught between one to five years. In addition, 68.9% preschool 82.1% and kindergarten teachers reported they had over 21 children in their respective classrooms. Although the survey did not inquire about student-teacher ratios, some of the participants indicated that there was more than one teacher in their classrooms.

Since the majority of early childhood schools in Ghana are privately owned, higher percentages (66.4% preschool and 75.7% kindergarten teachers) reported that they teach in private schools. Furthermore, although some of the participants may have taught different levels during their teaching careers, 51.8% preschool and 40.5% kindergarten teachers reported that they were professionally certified to teach at the preschool and kindergarten levels respectively. Moreover, 82.6% preschool and 78.2% kindergarten teachers reported that they had taken courses or attended training programs on child development.

### **Instrumentation**

An examination of relevant studies revealed a dearth of rating scales that have been validated to measure preschool and kindergarten teachers' beliefs about children's play. Beliefs about play are normally assessed via interviews or self-developed questionnaires without demonstrated validity (Fogle & Mendez, 2006). In an attempt to address this limitation, the researcher was granted permission to derive items from the Parent Play Beliefs Scale (PPBS) developed by Fogle and Mendez. The PPBS is a self-administered questionnaire that is rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The PPBS was chosen because it relates to the focus of the study and the two constructs, Play Support and Academic Focus have adequate reliability, with Cronbach's alphas of 0.90 and 0.73 respectively. In addition to the items derived from the PPBS, the researcher

added ten demographic questions and five questions regarding teachers' general knowledge about play. The resulting instrument, Teachers' Play Beliefs Survey (TPBS) is a self administered questionnaire that is rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The TPBS, which includes two sub-scales, Play Support and Academic Focus was used to collect data for this study.

## Procedure

The survey was administered individually via the assistance of some directors of early childhood care and development institutions in Accra and Winneba. The data was collected in two waves. In the first wave of data collection, participants were preschool and kindergarten teachers attending professional development training programs in Accra and Winneba. A total of 113 participants (60 preschool and 53 kindergarten teachers) completed and returned the surveys from a pool of 115 teachers, yielding a 98% return rate. The second wave of data collection occurred two weeks later and consisted of participants from selected early childhood educational institutions in Accra. A total of 108 participants (50 preschool and 58 kindergarten teachers) completed and returned the surveys from a pool of 120 teachers, yielding a 90% participation rate.

## Data Analysis

The data gathered were collated, edited, coded, and processed into the computer. In addition, the data were analyzed using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) statistics.

## FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

After testing the hypotheses, the results obtained are presented in Tables 1 to 6.

***H<sub>01</sub>***: There is no statistically significant difference in Ghanaian teachers' scores on the Teachers' Play Beliefs Survey (TPBS) when compared by level of teaching.

Table 1 shows the difference between teachers' beliefs about children's play when compared by level of teaching. The table reveals that there is no statistically significant difference between preschool and kindergarten teachers beliefs about play as indicated by the ANOVA test,  $F(1, 219) = 0.05, p = 0.83$ . The associated probability value of 0.83 is greater than the preselected significance level of 0.05,  $p > 0.05$  showing that the difference is not statistically significant. The null hypothesis is therefore accepted. Also, the mean test score for preschool teachers ( $M = 3.31, SD = 0.32$ ) was very similar to the mean score for kindergarten teachers ( $M = 3.32, SD = 0.32$ ), which indicates that preschool and kindergarten teachers have similar beliefs about play.

In addition, the results revealed no statistically significant differences between preschool and kindergarten teachers' scores on the Play Support and Academic Focus subscales. Results for the Play Support Subscale was  $F(1, 219) = 0.01, p = 0.94$ , thus  $p > 0.05$ . The mean test score for preschool teachers ( $M = 4.01, SD = 0.44$ ) was the same as the mean test score for kindergarten teachers ( $M = 4.01, SD = 0.44$ ). On the other hand, the results for the Academic Focus subscale was  $F(1, 219) = 0.23, p = 0.63, p > 0.05$ . The preschool teachers' average test score of ( $M = 2.25, SD = 0.46$ ) was similar to the average test score of kindergarten teachers ( $M = 2.28, SD = 0.44$ ). Table 2 provides information on teachers' play beliefs subscales scores when compared by school level of teaching. The results for the subscales further confirm the acceptance of the null hypothesis.

Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way Analysis of Variance for Comparison of Teachers' Play Beliefs Survey Total Scores by Level of Teaching.*

	Preschool Teachers		Kindergarten Teachers			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i> (1, 219)	<i>p</i>
TPBS Total	3.31	0.32	3.32	0.32	0.05	0.83

Table 2

*Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way Analysis of Variance for Comparison of Teachers' Play Beliefs Survey Subscales Scores by Level of Teaching.*

	Preschool Teachers		Kindergarten Teachers			
Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i> (1, 219)	<i>p</i>
Play Support Subscale	4.01	0.44	4.01	0.44	0.01	0.94
Academic Focus Subscale	2.25	0.46	2.28	0.44	0.23	0.63

**Ho<sub>2</sub>:** There is no statistically significant difference in Ghanaian Teachers' scores on the Teachers' Play Beliefs Survey (TPBS) when compared by years of teaching experience.

As shown in Table 3, the results of the ANOVA statistical test conducted to compare Teachers' Play Beliefs Survey total scores by years taught experience revealed no statistically significant differences among the five categories of years taught,  $F(4, 214) = 0.73$ ,  $p = 0.57$ ,  $p > 0.05$ . The associated probability value of 0.57 is greater than the preselected significance level of 0.05, showing that the difference is not statistically significant. Thus, the null hypothesis is accepted. The mean test scores for the various categories of years taught were similar, 1-5 years ( $M = 3.32$ ,  $SD = 0.31$ ), 6-11 years ( $M =$

3.32, SD = 0.34), 12-15years (M = 3.37, SD = 0.30), 16-20years (M = 3.22, SD = 0.29) and 21 years and above (M = 3.23, SD = 0.37). These mean test scores indicate that teachers' play beliefs do not vary by years of teaching experience.

Furthermore, Teachers' Play Beliefs Survey subscales scores were compared by years of teaching experience and the results revealed no statistically significant differences among the five categories of years taught as indicated in Table 4. Results for the Play Support Subscale was  $F(4, 214) = 1.71, p = 0.15, p > 0.05$ . The mean test scores for the five categories were, 1-5years ( $M = 4.04, SD = 0.40$ ), 6-11years ( $M = 3.99, SD = 0.49$ ), 12-15years ( $M = 4.16, SD = 0.40$ ), 16-20years ( $M = 3.84, SD = 0.49$ ) and 21years and over ( $M = 4.01, SD = 0.61$ ). With regard to the Academic Focus subscale, the results was  $F(4, 214) = 0.40, p = 0.81, p > 0.05$ . The mean test scores for the five categories were, 1-5years ( $M = 2.25, SD = 0.47$ ), 6-11years ( $M = 2.33, SD = 0.47$ ), 12-15years ( $M = 2.19, SD = 0.30$ ), 16-20years ( $M = 2.29, SD = 0.36$ ) and 21years and over ( $M = 2.32, SD = 0.51$ ). Although there were no statistically significant differences among the five categories of years taught, there were differences in the mean test scores for the Play Support Subscale and the Academic Focus Subscale.

Table 3

*Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way Analysis of Variance for Comparison of Teachers' Play Beliefs Survey Total Scores by Years Taught.*

	1-5		6-11		12-15		16-20		21+	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
TPBS Total	3.32	0.31	3.32	0.34	3.37	0.30	3.22	0.29	3.23	0.37

Table 4

*Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way Analysis of Variance for Comparison of Teachers' Play Beliefs Survey Subscales Scores by Years Taught.*

[illegible]

Subscale	4.04	0.40	3.99	0.49	4.16	0.40	3.84	0.49	4.01	0
Academic Focus Subscale	2.25	0.47	2.33	0.47	2.19	0.30	2.29	0.36	2.32	0

**Ho<sub>3</sub>:** There is no statistically significant difference in Ghanaian teachers' scores on the Teachers' Play Beliefs Survey (TPBS) when compared by child development course(s) taken.

Table 5 shows that the ANOVA statistical test conducted to compare teachers' play beliefs total scores by child development course(s) revealed no statistically significant differences between teachers who had taken child development course(s) and teachers who had not taken child development course(s),  $F(1, 217) = 2.06, p = 0.15, p > 0.05$ . Since the associated probability level of 0.15 is greater than the 0.05 level of significance, it shows that the difference is not statistically significant and therefore the null hypothesis is therefore accepted. The mean score for teachers who had taken child development course(s) was ( $M = 3.33, SD = 0.31$ ), and that of teachers who had taken not child development course(s) was ( $M = 3.25, SD = 0.33$ ). Moreover, Teachers' Play Beliefs Survey subscale scores were compared by child development courses taken. The results revealed no statistically significant difference between teachers who had taken child development course(s) and teachers who had not taken child development course(s) as shown in Table 6. Results for the Play Support Subscale was  $F(1, 217) = 2.49, p = 0.12$ , thus  $p > 0.05$ . The mean test score for teachers who had taken child development course(s) was ( $M = 4.03, SD = 0.45$ ) and the average test score for teachers who had not taken child development course(s) was ( $M = 3.92, SD = 0.40$ ). In addition, the results for the Academic Focus subscale was  $F(1, 217) = 0.05, p = 0.83, p > 0.05$ . The mean test scores for teachers who had taken child development course(s) and those who had not taken child development course(s) were ( $M = 2.27, SD = 0.44$ ) and ( $M = 2.25, SD = 0.48$ ) respectively.

Table 5

Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way Analysis of Variance for Comparison of Teachers' Play Beliefs Survey Total Scores by Child Development Course(s) Taken.

	Taken Child Development Course(s)		Not Taken Child Development Course(s)			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i> (1, 217)	<i>p</i>
TPBS Total	3.33	0.31	3.25	0.33	2.06	0.15

Table 6



*Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way Analysis of Variance for Comparison of Teachers' Play Beliefs Survey Subscales Scores by Child Development Course(s) Taken*

	Taken Child Development Course(s)		Not Taken Child Development Course(s)			
Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i> (1, 217)	<i>p</i>
Play Support Subscale	4.03	0.45	3.92	0.40	2.49	0.12
Academic Focus Subscale	2.27	0.44	2.25	0.48	0.05	0.83

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

In this study, the results of the ANOVA tests conducted revealed no statistically significant differences in preschool and kindergarten Teachers' Play Beliefs Survey total scores. In addition, the results revealed no statistically significant differences in teachers' play beliefs when compared by years taught. Further ANOVA tests revealed no statistically significant differences in teachers' play beliefs when compared by child development course(s) taken. The findings indicate a failure to reject the hypotheses tested in this study.

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, there is no statistically significant difference in teachers' total and subscale scores when compared by level of teaching. This result indicates that preschool and kindergarten teachers' maintain similar beliefs about play. Both preschool and kindergarten teachers reported that play was important for children's learning and development across key domains, which was reflected in their responses. The null hypothesis is therefore accepted. The Play Support Subscale had 18 items with possible scores ranging from 1-5. Scores on the Play Support Subscale ranged from 2.63 to 4.83, with a mean of 4.01 ( $SD = 0.44$ ). This finding supports the inference by child development scholars that play is both valuable and appropriate for young children (Frost et al., 2005; Kowalski, Wyver, Masselos & De Lacey, 2005; Schiller, 2000).

On the other hand, the respondents' scores on the Academic Focus Subscale were lower, ranging from 1.50 to 4.41, with a mean of 2.26 ( $SD = 0.45$ ). The high Play Support Subscale scores indicate that the sample of teachers valued play in early childhood classrooms. According to Bodrova and Leong (2003), educators have always considered play essential in early childhood classrooms because it promotes the learning of pre-academic skills and concepts.

Tables 3 and 4 show that Teachers' Play Beliefs Survey total and subscale scores are not statistically significant when compared by number years taught. This finding indicates that Ghanaian early

childhood educators' beliefs about play are not influenced by their years of teaching experience. The null hypothesis is therefore accepted. This supports the findings of McMullen (1997) that formal experiences have little influence on previously held implicit beliefs. Nonetheless, Smith (1997) conducted a study on student teachers' beliefs about developmentally appropriate practices and concluded that formal experiences are socialization processes by which previously held beliefs are modified. From the findings of McMullen and Smith, it can be argued that teachers of young children need depth and breadth of both education and experience, not one or the other (Horn-Wingard & Hyson, 2000; McMullen & Alat, 2002). Knowledge and experience are more likely to lead to the provision of high-quality early care and education that would emphasize both play and basic academic skills. In this regard, play will be used as a curricular tool to enhance academic skills. This is important because both classical and contemporary play researchers (e.g., Bergen, 2002; Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Vygotsky, 1966) suggest that when children are appropriately supported in their play, the play enhances their learning and development.

Tables 5 and 6 show that there is no statistically significant difference between the play beliefs of teachers who had taken course(s) in child development and teachers who had not taken course(s) in child development, as reflected in the Teachers' Play Beliefs Survey total and subscale scores. The null hypothesis 3 was therefore accepted. This finding contradicts conclusions drawn from other research studies. Some studies in the literature suggested that teachers who had taken coursework or engaged in training specific to the acquisition of child development knowledge and skills, develop competence, understand individual children's areas of competence, and become aware of children's difficulties during play activities (Hampton & Fantuzzo 2003; Kowalski et al., 2005; Saracho, 2002; Spodek & Saracho, 1998). Similarly, other researchers assert that teachers who have taken coursework or engaged in training specific to the acquisition of knowledge and skills associated with working effectively with young children, engage more in behaviors that are associated with the developmentally appropriate philosophy (Scarr, Eisenberg & Deater-Deckard, 1994; Snider & Fu, 1990).

While some extant research studies suggest that the overall level of education attained is the most significant factor in the adoption of a developmentally appropriate philosophy (Kowalski et al., 2005; Wilcox-Herzog & Ward, 2004), other studies contend that it is not the level but the type and content of education that are most important (Cassidy, Buell, Pugh-Hoese & Russell, 1995; McMullen & Alat, 2002; Scarr et al., 1994; Snider & Fu, 1990). This is particularly vital when considering early childhood educators, a group whose members, as found in this study, have a wide variance in terms of professional qualifications and whose members enter the field at different levels. According to McMullen and Alat, regardless of all of the evidence from research about the importance of the qualifications of professionals who work with young children, currently, at any given early childhood program, there is diversity of qualifications among the teachers.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS**

The findings of this study provide immense implications for stakeholders in the field of early childhood education and development, particularly, early childhood educators, prospective teachers, school administrators, school social workers, policy makers and parents. In this study, it was found that both preschool and kindergarten teachers maintain similar beliefs about the importance of play for children's learning and development. However, in contemporary society, most critics view children's play as valueless and have therefore advocated for academic-focused curricular in early childhood

classrooms. In order for teachers to maintain a balance between play and academic learning, it is important that teacher preparation and professional development programs emphasize theory, research, and best practices on how teachers can effectively utilize play as a curricular tool in school/educational settings.

Also, since there was no significant difference between the play beliefs of teachers who had taken courses in child development and those who had not, the findings of this study could be used to address potential gaps in coursework for teacher preparation programs and continuing education for practicing teachers. Specifically, pre-service teachers may benefit from opportunities to understand and use play as a curricular tool in early childhood classrooms during field placements or teaching practice. According to Bergen (1998), future educators need deep understanding of the usefulness of play and the capability to articulate how play must be incorporated in the curriculum if mastery of academic and social skills is desired. In addition, school administrators/directors would find such information helpful in hiring teachers who are likely to advocate and use play to promote learning and development of the children in their classrooms. Also, since the challenges to the use of play as a method of instruction in school settings are not unexpected, it is important that school social workers increase their knowledge about play so that they can support teachers to educate society, especially parents about the usefulness of play.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the increasing emphasis on academic skills in early childhood programs comes with both promise and threat. The researcher therefore predicts a situation where play would be completely pushed out of the preschool curriculum in the very near future. However, policy initiatives could turn society's attention to why and how play enhances children's learning and development. The realization of a play-based curricular at the preschool level therefore requires the cooperation of many actors. International and national educational bodies could enact policies that will ensure that children are given opportunities to play, especially in school settings. Although many research findings have shown that play is important for the optimal development of children across cultures and nationalities, many factors, such as teachers' beliefs enhance or limit young children's play activities.

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